

REMINDER OF GRIM WAR STRIKES OFFICE

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A Newport News dental office, which started "Operation Send-A- Smile" for soldiers in Iraq, had a special connection to some of the engineers attacked this week.

The mess hall bombing in Mosul, Iraq, this week rocked a tiny dentist's office in Oyster Point, where a picture of eight members of the 276th National Guard battalion sits delicately between a pair of tiny poinsettias.

Dr. Stephen MacGregor and his staff created "Operation Send-A- Smile" after a patient deployed with the unit early last year. Since then, they have sent over everything from dental floss to worn dental tools. But this week, as casualty counts mounted without names, the photo morphed from a warm connection into a grim reminder.

"It's been very hard," MacGregor said quietly. "It was a hard day to work."

One of the grinning, camouflage-clad soldiers won't be coming home. It's unclear which of the faces in the photo belongs to Nicholas Mason, a 20-year-old from King George, Va., who has been identified as one of the American dead.

"We've been grieving and mourning all day," said MacGregor's wife, Cynthia, who also works as a dentist here.

The office, which does a military-heavy business, has been busy and that's been a relief.

"In some ways it was good. We had to do what we had to do to get through the day," said office manager Brenda Tillage. "You don't have to meet any of the people to know them and to feel they're a part of you."

They have received word that the soldier who prompted the spontaneous adoption program, Spc. John Metzgar, is safe. He headed for duty in the Middle East last spring and essentially grew up in the practice, where his mother is still a patient.

The outreach program started a few months after Metzgar left and Tillage asked his mother for a list of goodies to send over. As luck would have it, precious commodities in the desert were easy to come by in a dentist's office. Because dental hygiene isn't a high priority, the troops needed all the help they could get. MacGregor was happy to oblige, sending over toothbrushes, toothpaste, floss and even his own worn tools.

"They actually asked for old dental instruments," Stephen MacGregor said. "They use them to clean their rifles."

After some legwork from Tillage's daughter, the program enlisted the help of other businesses, local schools and patients who stuffed boxes full of baby wipes, soap, shampoo, magazines and books. An oversized plastic box

covered in red, white and blue stars and streamers sits next to Tillage's desk with donations.

Even though the unit was scheduled to return home in the next few weeks, the office will continue to take donations. The goods will find their way to troops, although no one in the office wants to intrude on distraught families.

"This is a private grieving time, so we're still waiting, but it's important to us to find out what happens to everyone in the unit," Cynthia MacGregor said. "We want to know ... we want to know."

After eight months of staring at a pack of smiling soldiers, it's impossible to disconnect.

"I know that troops are getting hurt and killed all the time, and I don't mean to value one life more than another," Tillage said. "But when it's someone you've built a bond with, it hurts so much more."

As thoughts of the soldiers moved to the forefront, this week's holiday celebrations seemed inconsequential.

"When I was sitting on my couch looking at my tree and all the presents underneath it," Tillage said, "all I could think was that none of that means anything."

Other Peninsula residents heard better reports from Mosul. Thursday morning the Rev. Steve Dorsie's e-mail inbox held a note from parishioner Spc. Demitreus Toban, who was stationed at the bombed base. Though shaken by the attack, Toban is alive and uninjured. *

UPDATE

SHIPYARD WELDER OK

The Rev. Steve Dorsie of Newport News got an e-mail from Army Reserve Spc. Demitreus Toban Thursday. Toban was in the military mess tent when it was attacked, but escaped unharmed.

VIGIL SCHEDULED

Family and friends of soldiers serving in Iraq will hold a candlelight prayer vigil in West Point tonight. The vigil starts at 6 p.m. at the corner of Route 33 and Main Street.

WOUNDED SOLDIER HOME

A soldier wounded in the attack flew into Norfolk International Airport on Thursday on his way home to Richmond. His flight had been re-routed to Norfolk because of a mishap at the Richmond airport. *

[Illustration]

Staff photo (color) by KENNETH SILVER; Caption: Dr. Cynthia MacGregor and her husband, Dr. Stephen D. MacGregor, talk Thursday afternoon about the 276th National Guard battalion, which suffered a fatality in the recent suicide bombing in Mosul.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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